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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Field Visit Report to Matebeleland North;  
7-9 November 2002

REFS: (A) Harare 2496, (B) Harare 2623

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INTRODUCTION  
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1. This cable summarizes the major findings on the food security situation in Matebeleland North Province from a recent field visit conducted to the area by a joint USAID Food for Peace, Famine Early Warning Service Network (FEWS NET) and World Food Programme (WFP) team.

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PURPOSE OF VISIT  
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2. The purpose of the visit was to conduct a rapid appraisal of the food security situation in Binga and Insiza districts of Matebeleland province, and to provide guidance to the Regional Food for Peace Officer (FFPO) visiting Matebeleland province on a mission to investigate the politicization of food aid in the province (see reftel A for sep-FFPO report on this latter subject).

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METHODOLOGY  
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3. The trip was conducted over the period 7-9 November 2002. Findings presented in this report are based on a rapid appraisal of food markets in Bulawayo City and Lupane, Hwange and Binga Districts in Matebeleland North Province. Personal observations were complemented by interviews with representatives from WFP in Matebeleland, World Vision (WV), Organization for Rural Areas Progress (ORAP), and Dabane Trust (the last two local NGOs), as well as the District Administrator for Binga, the Binga Co-coordinator for the Catholic Archdiocese Ecumenical Commission (CADEC, the Zimbabwe equivalent of CARITAS), and villagers from Lupane, Hwange and Binga Districts. Note: Following preliminary discussions, Insiza was dropped from the visit itinerary due to security concerns related to the continuing sensitivity of the situation in that district (see reftel A for more on this subject). End Note.

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FOOD SECURITY SITUATION  
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4. The food security situation continues to worsen, both in the provincial capital (Bulawayo) and in the rural areas of Matebeleland. Food access is seriously limited by the run-away inflation - estimated at 144% as the end of October 2002, suppressed incomes and the ever-increasing levels of unemployment. Incomes of poor urban households are trailing way behind inflation. Recent salary reviews for unskilled and the semi-skilled workers saw their salaries increase to between ZD13,000 and ZD24,000 per month - between one-third and two-thirds less than the October 2002 Consumer Council of Zimbabwe recommended minimum expenditure basket for an average Low-Income-Urban household. The staple food maize meal and maize grain are not readily available in the shops, but are occasionally available on the parallel market at more than six times the controlled price. Bread, until recently the main substitute for maize meal (along with Irish potatoes and rice), is selling for twice its controlled price, and is in seriously short supply.

15. Prices of Selected Basic Goods as at 8 November 2002:

Food Item	Unit	Controlled Price (ZW\$)	Prices in Binga Town (ZW\$)	Prices in Bulawayo City (ZW\$)
Bread	Loaf	60.44	160	130
Sugar	2kg	114.70	300	200
Irish potatoes	15kg	Na	3000	3000
Rice	2kg	Na	1075	800
Cooking oil	750ml	114.70	700	700

16. The majority of rural households in Matebeleland North did not have any meaningful harvest from the 2000/2001 or 2001/2002 production years. As a result, they have been dependent on food aid and/or the market for the last two marketing seasons. WFP is currently feeding between 40 and 70% of the people in five out of six districts of Matebeleland North Province. In Binga, the only district in which WFP is not currently operating, CADEC and some church groups were undertaking feeding operations. Save the Children - UK (SCF-UK) was active in providing assistance in Binga until they were stopped by Government, following accusations of supporting the opposition in the September local government elections. Note: SCF-UK has just received final approval from the GOZ this week to resume their humanitarian assistance activities in this district. They expect to resume feeding programs there soon. End Note. WFP, through their NGO implementing partners in this Province, ORAP and World Vision, supplies about 2,000 MT per month of food aid in each of the districts in which they are operating.

17. Government, through the Grain Marketing Board (GMB), supplies about 1,000 MT of food to each district per month. The food is sold to local communities at around \$10.20/kg, down from ZW\$19/kg in May 2002, at distribution points established throughout the rural areas. Maize deliveries by GMB to the communities are very erratic in all of the districts of Matebeleland North. Households wait for between two to three months to get maize sufficient for only two to three weeks' needs. The main reasons for the irregular maize supply are reported to be limited stocks from the supply depots in Bulawayo, and inadequate transport to move available grain from Bulawayo to district depots and, in turn, to the selling points within the districts. Transporters are not comfortable with the generally poor road network. In the case of Binga, transporters find the route from Bulawayo too long and dangerous, particularly the section that goes through Kamativi Mines which has sharp curves and steep slopes. In addition, the strip road to Nkayi is accused of tearing tires apart with its deteriorating shoulders.

18. To address the access side of food security, government is operating a cash-for-labor programme, parallel to the food sales programme, in which community members undertake some work in infrastructure development and repair to receive between ZD500 and ZD1,500 per person per month for the work.

19. Poor management of GMB maize has allowed some unscrupulous villagers with cash to buy more food than they need which is being smuggled across the Zambezi River for sale in Zambia for hefty profits. For example, it was reported that a 50kg bag of maize bought for about ZD510 can be sold for up to ZD3,000 in Zambia. Binga residents complain that, in addition to maize grain and meal, sugar, fuel and other basic items are also being smuggled into Zambia. In addition, although illegal, limited maize grain sales by some private dealers are reported to be occurring throughout this Province.

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COPING STRATEGIES  
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19. To deal with the food shortages, rural communities are employing a variety of different coping strategies. Reported strategies include reducing the number of meals per day (while reductions to one meal per day were most common, some households are reportedly skipping meals for an entire day), feeding on leaf vegetables (kale, rape, chomolia, etc.), and collecting/eating wild fruits (baobab, utsiga) and vegetables (utende). Some households share the limited grain or maize meal that they receive as food assistance or buy from GMB with relatives and friends who have run out of stocks.

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PREPARATIONS FOR THE 2002/2003 PRODUCTION SEASON  
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10. Like the greater part of the country (see reftel B),  
Binga, Lupane and Hwange Districts have received adequate  
rains to date, and farmers have started planting this  
season's crops. Smallholder farmers in the three  
districts visited have limited stocks of sorghum and  
millet seed available to plant this year. There is no  
maize seed on the market. As a result, farmers are  
resorting to planting some of the maize grain they have  
received as food aid or bought from the GMB for food.  
Input support schemes run by government, NGOs and church  
organizations are attempting to address the seed  
availability and access constraints that are spread  
throughout the Province (and indeed the entire country -  
reftel B).

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COMMENT  
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11. The team's findings support the increasing gravity of  
the deteriorating food security situation in this region  
of the country. While the situation is indeed grim, it  
remains difficult to assess accurately due to the paucity  
of available/systematic data on the nutritional status of  
the affected populations. More effort needs to be  
devoted to national nutritional surveillance in Zimbabwe,  
on an urgent basis, to address this situation and guide  
future relief efforts over the coming critical "hungry  
season" months. The preliminary findings on preparations  
for the 2002/03 agricultural season appear to support  
similarly dire predictions for greater country at large  
(reftel A). Although it remains too early for any  
accurate projections, this initial anecdotal evidence  
bodes extremely ill for this chronically poor, rainfall  
deficit and highly food insecure region of the country.  
Sullivan